From Slavery to Freedom: Black Women, Cultural Resistance and Identity in Caribbean Plantation Society

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Until recently, black women were firmly on the 'margins of history'. My own research, complemented by studies by Beckles (1989), Morrissey (1989) and Gautier (1982) built on earlier pioneering studies by, for instance Mathurin (1974) and Alier-Martinez (1974) opening up discussion of Caribbean slave women. Yet, in contrast to studies of black American women and slavery, considerably enlarged by the development of both an academic 'black female epistemology' and a rich black women's literature, the Caribbean slave woman's identity remains under-explored. This relative invisibility is connected with three factors: the paucity of evidence from the black, as opposed to the white perspective; the fact that Caribbean and, even more so, British-born black women, are still under-represented in academic research and, closely linked, the continued dominance of white, male paradigm of slavery, including slave identity. Here I too can be criticised for no matter how much I exercise empathy, I am not a black woman and my 'social memory' embraces white, not black definitions of slavery. Hence, in this paper I attempt a critique of white constructions of black women's identity as opposed to exploring identity as it is experienced 'from the inside' by black women (a voyage of self-discovery now being charted through literature, art and oral tradition). The wider framework of this critique is the interlinked and deeply complex historical development of both black and white identities and the relationships of power and resistance centred on cultural differences that sculptured those identities.

The study of slavery is an area fraught with problems, for the 'racial terror' of enslavement still has a powerful and emotive influence on black consciousness in the Atlantic Diaspora (the black diaspora in the Americas, the Caribbean and Western Europe originating through the transatlantic slave trade). It is linked to politically loaded contemporary debates over black identity and the nature of gender, class and race oppression. Even the definition of geographical (Caribbean, West Indies), historical (Eurocentred periodisation) and socio-cultural (black diaspora, Afro Caribbean, coloured, mulatto) terms has developed out of concepts inherited from European expansion and colonisation and is thus problematic (Cole-Hamcharii, 1993). My focus within these debates is how black

women's history has been interpreted, what Catherine Hall has eloquently dubbed 'white visions' of black lives (Hall, 1993). White men (and in certain ways, white women) had the cultural and economic power to define slave identities in a way that reinforced their own superiority. But an examination of white-defined 'identities' also demands recognition of black cultural resistance produced in the mediation of those identities. The cultural struggles that developed over the negotiation of black identity are central to understanding a divided or 'double consciousness' of slaves in simultaneously accommodating to and resisting enslavement. For black women the term 'triple consciousness' may be more appropriate as they not only had to negotiate conflicts between a racist white and a formative Afrocentric creole culture, but also gender identity in relation to white men, black men and white women.

My central argument is that women redefined the 'imagined identities' created for them by whites by effecting a fusion between African-derived cultural beliefs and powerful resistance strategies which undermined the slave system. By women, I refer here primarily to the ordinary field slaves who constituted the most culturally 'independent', if the most harshly treated, slaves. Ironically, it was the powerful tensions they experienced between production in the formal economy and biological and cultural reproduction of the slave community that ensured their pivotal contribution to the general resistance against, and successful survival of slavery. I have concentrated primarily on the later and, arguably, most exploitative phase of slavery when a conjunction of disintegrative forces culminated in the overthrow of a system which had indelibly reshaped the world.

To try and elaborate on a thorny and controversial area I will, firstly, try to clarify the meanings of culture, identity, power and resistance in the context of women's location in slave society and the complex web of interactions between black and white. This addresses the crucial question of what identity is. I will then examine how black women's identities were interpreted through 'the eyes of the [white] beholder' and assess problems of critically evaluating such identities in relation to historical sources. This is followed by a closer look at the link between white oppression and resistance struggles in which women engaged to defend themselves and the slave community against psychic and cultural disintegration. Finally, I have included an analysis of the transition to freedom and the reworking of black identities that emerged with developments in colonial society in the nineteenth century. Here, I will argue that, in contrast to the post-slavery period, the slave experience, brutal and reifying as it was, forged a particularly dynamic cultural resistance that became subdued and more covert in freedom. Thus the unifying theme is the search for the 'invisible' woman and the continuities in cultural struggles in black communities in

the Caribbean. Such struggles were generated initially by the trauma of slavery, but remain vibrant in contemporary black communities.

The Cultural Interface? Identity, Power, and Resistance in Slave Society

To bring women back from the margins of history, to illuminate their struggle for an individual and collective consciousness and identity led me to focus more closely on the relationship between culture and resistance and the shaping of new identities within the complex and changing patterns of gender, race and class oppression. Slaves did not simply react to material conditions. It was important to extend definitions of resistance away from group or individual protest centred on freedom to wider forms of non-cooperation symbolic of a strong desire to retain human integrity and survive. Such resistance embraced a struggle against forces that undermined the slaves' Afrocentric culture. I do not use this term in the sense of a static, 'authentic' culture or 'mythologised Africanity', which Paul Gilroy has so eloquently criticised (Gilroy, 1993) but as a recognition of the significance of Africa as a source of origin of black diaspora culture. The deep significance of cultural resistance is now being recognised. Michel de Certeau explains it thus:

> ' ...culture articulates conflicts ...It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary. [The] ingenious ways of which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices' [1]

This highlights action, not passivity but multiple resistance tactics and survival strategies that, for slave women, included 'compromise' in, for instance, concubinage with white men contrasted with strong resistance to pressures that threatened to undermine the Afrocentric family, marriage and childbearing customs. It embraces subversion of the system through female control of fertility that arguably included use of abortion and contraception. Women were able to turn the system to their own advantage in their participation in the informal economy centred on the provision-grounds and slave markets, allowed by the planters to boost food supply. All these tactics involved either tensions or 'contracts of compatibility' between white and slave cultures.

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[1]Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life:* London, 1988, p.xvii, cited in Gilroy, p.103.

Culture is a term frequently used loosely, without any precise, shared understanding. Here culture is broadly interpreted as a shared set of values coherently linking language, religion, kinship, work, family, leisure and the individual's conception of the world around them. It is adaptive and dynamic, not static and linked to power relations. 'Taking culture seriously' has opened up new debates in development studies whilst the greater emphasis on the relationship between ethnicity and identities in cultural studies has highlighted the centrality of culture, not only in interpreting post-modern society, but in the historical context. Cultural studies have contributed to a greater understanding of power, ideology and resistance, in that culture has been redefined as conflict and negotiation over meanings attached to class, gender, ethnic and national differences (Allen, 1990, pp. 331-347). These developments have provided important new conceptual frameworks but caution is needed in their use for there is a tendency to over centralise culture and minimise broader structural influences. Slave women's reality was that of profound economic exploitation as by 1800 they constituted 80 per cent of all economically active slaves(Higman, 1976, p.30). In establishing some autonomy of action and self-identity they had to fight against deep constraints of law, punishment and complete lack of human rights within an expanding international economy based on inequality and exploitation. Neither cultural nor structural analyses in themselves are adequate; as Peter Worsley points out in addressing the tensions between idealist and materialist conceptions, culture embraces the 'interplay between economic and political institutions and the rest of life'; it is not a 'separate sphere' or 'causally secondary' but central to the 'crucial institutions' which produce and communicate the ideas we live (Worsley, 1984, p.60). Here this conceptualisation of culture informs discussion of both white and black identity and links identity to wider political struggles against slavery.

Women are centre staged in the analysis because of their powerful imput into cultural production in the 'private' as oppose to the 'public' sphere (dominated by white culture). In any culture, women are arguably the principal transmitters of culture within the family and local community. But as Rosalda and Lamphère (1976) stress, it is women's work that ensures that the world and indeed humanity continues (a factor now at last being recognised in, for instance, development projects in Africa and elsewhere). These links between culture and material survival are clear in the vital contribution slave women made to social and biological reproduction in the slave community, in having prime responsibility for child care and domestic labour and contributing significantly to cultivation of slave plots or provision grounds. As Walter Rodney emphasised, women in the Caribbean became the primary 'cultural shield' that frustrated the efforts of whites to dehumanise Africans through servitude (Rodney, 1969, p.34.)

The cultural contribution of women, however, must be located within their relationship to white patriarchy and black sexism. This distinction is important. The definition of patriarchy as the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and wider society (Lerner, 1986, p.242) is arguably applicable only to white men in slave society. Sexism, as an ideology of male supremacy and of beliefs that support and sustain it, has validity for relations between black men and women. Thus sexism can still exist in societies, like black slave society, where patriarchy has been undermined. Women were more likely to be concentrated in the less skilled jobs in the formal economy, and even the skilled work of seamstressing or pottery-making was undervalued. Valued skilled male slaves often held positions of authority in the slave community and polygynous households (Higman, 1976, p.277). Overseers were predominantly black men and slave men in general benefited from women's domestic labour. A planter's wife commented on this:

> 'A wife and family ...have been the greatest possible advantage to a [male] slave ...his wife works and cooks, the children soon begin to assist the mother and they all work in their gardens and grounds' [2]

Such gender differences point to the existence of a specific 'women's culture' that develops within, and sometimes in resistance to, the primarily male-defined elements of particular cultures (in this case Euro and Afrocentric elements of slave society). Such 'women centred culture' is vital to the development of identity and encompasses friendship networks of women, their affective ties, rituals and 'folk knowledge'. As Lerner points out, women live a duality, as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture (Lerner, 1986, p.242). This 'women's culture' is explored in more depth below and links in with my reference in the introduction to the possible 'triple consciousness' of slave women.

The labyrinthine interpenetrations of culture, gender, class and power arguably reverberated more dramatically on the lives of slave women than those of slave men. Power relations between masters and slaves have always been ambiguous. For women slaves these ambiguities were intensified by the sexual dimension of their relationship with whites. The greatest power was vested in white men who were the major slave owners but as absenteeism increased this power was mediated through white or black male overseers. Power over black women's bodies in their productive capacity as asexual labour units thus meshed with male control

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[2]Mrs. A.C. Carmichael, *Domestic Manners and Social Conditions of the White, Coloured and Negro Populations of the West Indies* (London, 1833), 2 vols., 1, p.80.

over their sexuality, a form of oppression rarely experienced to the same degree by male slaves. Women risked cruelty if they resisted the white males' 'droit de seigneur'. Evidence suggests that white women also displaced their sexual jealousy in vicarious cruelty towards women slaves (Bush, 1990, p.114). This emphasises their equivocal position in relation to white women who were also subject to white male authority but had power over black men. After the early period of white indentureship, white women were increasingly withdrawn from physical labour and were serviced by black women. They were also slave owners in their own right (Beckles, 1993, pp.72-5).

Power in slave societies was not completely monolithic; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, some black women may have had limited sexual power over white men securing favours, including manumission, for themselves and their children (Bush, 1990, p.111). Here Foucault's argument about sexuality as a vital transfer point for relations of power is useful. This suggests the importance of power from below in the 'manifold relationships of force' in play in the machinery of economic production, families and institutions (Foucault, 1978, pp.103-7). However, the very nature of chattel slavery, backed by force and coercion, led to a peculiarly strong concentration of power. Women as field slaves worked in the harshest conditions and had the additional burdens of child-bearing. This has led to a tendency in the historiography of slavery to see women on large scale plantations as atomised production units estranged from kin, community and culture when it was arguably those very material pressures that inspired communal solidarity and resistance and kept the goal of liberation alive. These relationships of power are also paramount in understanding how black women made sense of their world and defined their identity. Their relationship to white women is again central here.

Black women became the 'other', whose debased and sexual nature reinforced white women's identity as pure and feminine, the white patriarchal ideal of womanhood. However, as Hilary Beckles has shown, not all white women fitted the idealised white male norm that had a far more powerful influence in the later eighteenth century reflecting the increasing power, materially and culturally, of bourgeois society. Up to the end of the seventeenth century there were poor indentured white female servants in the British Caribbean whose conditions of servitude were little better than those of slaves. In Barbados, at least, there is evidence from this period of sexual relationships and marriages between black men and white women (Beckles, 1993, pp.78-9). This becomes almost unheard of by the end of the eighteenth century when the need to maintain the profitability of sugar monoculture led to tighter regulation of slave society through both formal and informal codes. Yet whites did not demonise black male sexuality in Caribbean slave society to the same degree as occurred in

the Southern USA. An anonymous poem, 'The Runaway', quoted by the Jamaican planter, 'Monk' Lewis, is perhaps revealing here:

'Peter was a black boy;
Peter, him pull foot on day;
Buckra girl, him Peter's joy;
Lilly white girl entice him away.
Fye, Miss Sally, fye on you!
Poor Blacky Peter why undo?
Oh! Peter, Peter was a bad boy;
Peter was a Runaway
Him Missy him pray: him Massa so kind
Was moved by him prayer, and to Peter him say
"Well, boy, for this once I forgive you! - but mind
With the buckra girls you no more go away!
Though fair without, they're foul within;
Their heart is black, though white their skin.
Then Peter, Peter with me stay;
Peter no more run away!'[3]

The tone is trite and moralising, but in terms of identities of black and white women and, perhaps, more centrally, the attitudes of white males, it is revealing. Whereas it is usually black women who are depicted as the temptress, here it is a white woman. However she has been depicted as 'black within'. Does this reflect a general white misogyny towards all women as 'vessels of the devil' who without male control will lead men into wickedness? Indeed, strong arguments can be made that distinctions between white and black women were not based on gender but race and socio-economic position. In child-bearing, for instance, both black and white women shared the hazards of childbirth and, by the late eighteenth century, experienced increasing manipulation of their bodies by white males as a masculine medical science undermined female-centred midwifery and wrested more control over female sexuality. Indeed, white women may have been the greater victims of the development of what Foucault has termed 'Sciencia Sexualis', as the dictums of white plantation doctors created a new area of cultural struggle for black women during the late period of slavery.

Far more research on white women, particularly poorer women and prostitutes, whose behaviour was regarded as outside respectable codes, is indicated. This relates not only to their relations with black women but black men. Interestingly, whilst it has been recognised that white women experienced sexual jealousy, we have no record of how black women felt

[3]Cited in Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of A Residence Among the Negroes of The West Indies* (London, 1845), pp.120-1.

about white women. In the informal economic sector, however, there is evidence of competition between white and black female hucksters at the end of the eighteenth century but also a blurring of identities. Beckles suggests that in many ways their marketing patterns and associated customs were similar, with white women typically carrying baskets on their heads and babies strapped to their hips in an African manner (Beckles, 1993, pp.78-9). This underscores the way in which engagement in the informal economy was one area in which black women could exert a powerful influence.

But it was not only poorer white women who assimilated cultural traits of slaves. Visitors to the Indies commented adversely on the habits of white creole women. The portrayal of Antoinette Cosway as Rochester's mad first wife (starkly contrasted with the devoted and sensible Jane Eyre) in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a reflection of such negative attitudes. According to Edward Long, white women suffered from 'constant intercourse with negroe domestics' whose 'drawling dissonant gibberish', modes of dress and manners they 'insensibly adopted'. Women on remote plantations were particularly vulnerable. To quote Long:

> 'We may see in some of these places, a very fine young woman awkwardly dangling her arms, with the air of a negroe servant lolling almost the whole day upon beds or settees, her head muffled up with two or three handkerchiefs, her dress loose, and without stays. At noon, we find her employed in gobbling pepper pot, seated on the floor, with her sable handmaids around her.'[4]

Poorer urban female slave-owners were also spatially close to slaves and little better educated. Cultural fluidity was arguably two-way. Maria Nugent, the wife of a Jamaican governor and hence more 'anglo defined' as an expatriate, believed that white creole women were not untainted by contact with black culture. It was also noted that female slaves in habitual contact with whites, especially the 'light-skinned obedient housekeepers' and long-term mistresses of white men, emulated white women (Bush, 1981, p.255).

As Paul Gilroy argues, there is an ambiguity of culture in the Atlantic Diaspora and in the Caribbean black and white permeated cultural barriers (Gilroy, p.31). Carnival is a classic example here. Edward Kamau Brathwaite explored this dynamic cultural fusion in his seminal book, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (1971). The term Afrocentric is useful, however, in defining the primary cultural am-

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[4]Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica* (London,1774), 5 vols., 2, pp.412-13; P. Wright ed., *Lady Nugent's Jamaica Journal* (Kingston,1976), p.112; John Stewart, *A View of Jamaica* (London,1823), p.330.

bience of slaves (as opposed to whites whose primary cultural ambience was Eurocentered). There were common threads of Afrocentric culture throughout the English, French and Spanish Caribbean that had important implications for cultural struggles and identities. Within these common threads diversity existed. For female slaves this existed between creole and African-born women, domestic and field slaves, old and young. Women's experiences were also influenced by their location in the labour market in terms of whether they worked in rural or urban locations, in small- or large-scale enterprises. In the cultural cauldron of slave society, cultural negotiation had to take place not only between black and white, creole and African-born but also amongst slaves taken from different parts of Africa. However, a link was forged through resistance to slavery and the overarching economic and ideological power of whites.

White men essentially defined the limits and discourses of this power. However, white women were also significant as transmitters of the racist culture of slavery through their centrality to social reproduction and their unique status as upholders of male cultural honour. This involved 'behaving' as respectable, morally superior women in contrast to black women who, for whites, exhibited the worst forms of 'bad African practices'. In this respect, there are contrasts with other colonial societies such as South Africa or the Indian Raj that were also structured by an institutionalised racism (Sharp, 1991). This contrasts starkly with the cultural role of black women as transmitters of resistance to white power. Thus whilst both black and white women's identities were forged through their relationships to the slave system, black women's identities were uniquely influenced by resistance to enslavement and the identities constructed for them by contemporary racial ideologies.

At this point it is essential to explore the idea of 'identity'. There are two main ways of looking at identity. Both are intrinsically related and applicable in this analysis. The simplest concept of identity is as a tag or label, that is, how you are seen by others. This applies to some extent to white constructs of black identity, explored below. But identity is also how you see yourself, your consciousness of being and where you fit into the world. This more complex definition raises the question as to what the distinction is between identity and consciousness and how do both concepts relate to cultural struggles? Kum Kum Bhavnani defines identity as a concept that has provided motivation for many struggles that challenge social, economic, political and ideological injustices, including those against enslavement. It is, however, a 'slippery concept' as it is not fixed and is never closed. Hence identities are always being reworked and individuals can have different 'identities' in different contexts (Bhavnani, 1993). Arguably, this has relevance to black Caribbean women both in terms of historical time scales (periodisation of the changing character of

slavery and processes of personal transformation through capture, creolisation and emancipation) and the way in which women had to negotiate a multiplicity of overlapping and frequently conflicting identities, as in the tensions between the white-defined public and the more Afro-defined private spheres of their lives.

But how do these fragmented identities motivate and underpin collective as well as individual resistance? What *is* 'black identity'? For Paul Gilroy it

> '...is not simply a social or political category used or abandoned according to the extent which the rhetoric that supports and legitimises it is persuasive or institutionally powerful...it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self...[an] outcome of practical activity...language, gesture, bodily significations, desires.'[5]

There is still a problem here as to how a coherent identity can be lived when it is not always stable. Also, how does this coherent identity relate to the concept of 'double consciousness', that is a simultaneous identity within and without a dominant culture, first developed by W.E.B. Dubois writing in the early nineteenth century, which Gilroy also analyses in some depth? In *The Black Atlantic* (1993) Gilroy has developed an important and challenging analysis of black identity and consciousness, a sensitive and difficult area to problematise. However, he refers in the main to a generalised, as opposed to gender specific, identity. To progress the analysis here we need to explore the ways in which consciousness is formed and the relationship between individual identities and group consciousness. The problem of reading the present back into the past must also be considered. How applicable are concepts, including gender, identity and racism, which were developed in the context of present intellectual debates and socio-economic formations, in understanding both white and black identities, male and female, in the era of slavery? Here it may be helpful to look back, with a critical eye, to the Marxist and Hegelian origins of debates about consciousness and struggle. These were developed initially within the context of Enlightenment thought which produced a serious challenge to the philosophical and material basis of slavery.

In *The German Ideology* (1845-6) Marx distinguished between a consciousness of the immediate sensuous environment (for slaves, consciousness of physical pain), a consciousness of limited connections with other persons (awareness of being a woman, as opposed to a man may be seen here as a fundamental primary consciousness) and an empowering 'self-consciousness' engaged in a struggle for mastery over material forces (slave

[5] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, 1993), p.102.

revolt). In his critique of the Hegelian idealist conception of consciousness and historical change, he argued against 'historical conceptualisations of an epoch' which separated consciousness from ordinary life. From here he developed the theory of ruling ideologies that perpetuated this 'illusory' separation and proposed that, for the mass of people, the removal of false conceptions of 'consciousness' of humans could only be affected by 'altered [material] circumstances', not 'theoretical deductions'. 'Liberation', he wrote, 'is a historical not a mental act and is brought about by historical conditions.'[6]

There have been many valid and important critiques of classic Marxism's over-emphasis on materialism and monolithic notions of power, but the analysis of problems of consciousness and liberation are still on the political agenda and should not be too readily dismissed. Current postmodern conceptions of the relationship between consciousness and power deriving, for example, from Gramscian analyses of ruling class ideologies and Foucaultian notions of the plurality of power relations and life worlds, or identities may also have only limited relevance to slave society: they were developed within a culturally specific framework of mature twentieth century 'Western' liberal democracies. With the exception perhaps of Foucault, none of these theoretical developments have specifically analysed relations between power, sexuality and consciousness and none have improved on the earlier theorists in tackling gender. Thus, in looking back into slave society, Marx's original conception of consciousness may still have some relevance in underscoring the links between power, material conditions, consciousness and liberation, that is in explaining where consciousness comes from.

If we accept that identity is a self-consciousness of the economic, cultural and ideological frameworks that shape the 'reality' of human beings' diverse experiences, we can see how problematic this was in slave society. Was black women's identity structured through 'white visions' of the black world, 'imagined' identities that fitted in with the interests of slave owners and their justifications of slavery; or was it shaped through pro-active responses to material conditions in the form of both resistance and compromise? How much was it influenced by where individuals located themselves in relation to the 'counter-culture' of the slaves and, for women, a 'women's culture' that threaded back to Africa? The problem which faced slaves was how to reconcile and negotiate the fragmented and conflicting identities deriving from these different influences to develop a more stable identity that could ensure survival and generate resistance. The use of the concept 'identity' will relate here to the problems of se-

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[6]Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (London, 1965), pp.52-3,42-3,56.

curing a coherent individual and group self-consciousness that can inform political action and /or resistance against oppression. At this point we can perhaps explore these interconnections between gender, identity, consciousness and resistance. This demands a closer examination of black women's gruelling Odyssey from Africa to the slave plantations, as interpreted by contemporary observers and modern historians and writers.

Daughters of Injur'd Afrik? White Constructs of Slave Women

Although in many ways slave men and women shared a common oppression through slavery, women's experience differed qualitatively to that of male slaves. As already stressed, important differences existed in the jobs they did, the status accorded to them, manumission, social mobility and the exercise of power. Moreover, the conflicting demands of reproduction and production placed women under 'psychic pressures' not experienced to the same degree by free women or slave men. A sexual division of labour that perpetuated gender inequalities existed in both the public and private spheres of women's lives with important implications for women's identity. Why and how did this gender inequality originate? This is partially answered in the division of labour in the African societies where women were captured, the relationship between the internal African slave trade and the transatlantic trade, the changing labour demands of Caribbean slavery and women's position in both European and African patriarchy.

Women have always been vulnerable to enslavement because of their status in patriarchal societies and women slaves predominated in the internal African slave trade. Indeed, as David Brion Davis points out, on the earliest pre-literate tablets from the Middle East, the term for 'slave girl' appeared before the more general, 'slave' (Davis, 1984, p.35). In Africa, as in the Caribbean, women were highly valued for their labour, not simply as child-bearers. Moreover it may be argued that women experienced slavery of a sort within the family through the practice of 'bride price' and were accustomed to being bartered and having little control over their own destinies (Robertson and Klein, 1983, pp.4-9). So for some women, their identity was already defined pre-capture as domestic slaves. For those who were not enslaved, identity came primarily through motherhood and in relationship to the deeper structures of family and kin that cohered African societies. It can be argued that in such societies collective as opposed to individual identity prevailed and women were supported by a 'remarkable degree of female solidarity' (Cutrufelli, 1983, p.146). Unfortunately, the lack of contemporary evidence relating to the

lives of eighteenth-century African women is even more acute than for Caribbean slave women. Rare accounts, however, provide a slim testimony to how women were taken into captivity. 'Damel [King of Cayor on the Gambia River] has pillaged the village of Yene. He has taken my woman captive . . . ' laments an anonymous eighteenth-century Wolof man (cited in Thesée, 1987, p.284). Women were taken in dawn raids as the first up and out of their houses, sometimes being surprised drawing water at wells outside the village. Deception and bribery was used, not simply violence, and women could also be sold into slavery to settle debts or as punishment for adultery or crime. Richer women could substitute slaves (Boulègue, 1987, p.243).

In *A Woman Named Solitude* (1972) the French writer, André Schwarz-Bart, imaginatively recaptures the experiences of one African woman from capture, through the profound disorientation of the passage to the Caribbean, to adjustment to slave life. Her daughter, Solitude, is based on a real woman who was embroiled in rebel activity in Guadeloupe during the French Revolution and executed in 1802. She was reputedly born to a 'salt water' African raped on ship board by white men. This sensitive fictional narrative is grounded on a solid anthropological understanding of West African societies and affords some valuable insights, illuminating key themes in slave women's lives which historical research is now beginning to confirm. It emphasises how essential it was for women to hold on to some vestiges of their own identity to prevent cultural and psychic annihilation. The sense of fear and loss must have been profound. Africans were aware of the 'hell' of the Caribbean and the long waits in the dreadful slave barracoons or 'castles' on the coast, but resistance was evident from the moment of capture. Women, separated from the men, were reputedly 'sulky' and sang 'sad laments'. They were forced by 'threats and blows' to eat and if they were still recalcitrant they were flogged (Bush, 1990, p.56).

The ultimate denial of their new 'reality' was suicide, possibly, as Sir Hans Sloane noted in the early seventeenth century, in the belief that they would return to their own countries through death. The incidence of suicide remained high in the initial 'seasoning' period in the Caribbean. Such responses were viewed by whites as evidence of mental instability. Alexander Falconbridge, for instance, observed that on being purchased by Europeans many Africans became 'raving mad' and many died so, 'particularly the women'. Failed suicide was also punished by floggings. There is evidence, however, that, for some, survival was secured through collective solidarity and dignity. Reverend John Riland, a planter turned abolitionist, who sailed in 1801 from Liverpool to Jamaica in a slaveship, recorded that when women were forced to dance on the deck they always maintained their dignity and 'kept themselves aloof', manifesting

'an indignation that long continued habit could not suppress when forced to behave childishly' (Bush, 1982, p.18).

Once on the plantation women and men had to begin to negotiate new identities as chattel slaves. For women this meant confronting white constructs of their identity that made them particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and adjusting to a labour regime that undermined existing gender relations, including the constraints imposed on them by arranged marriages and domestic enslavement that existed in Africa. These transformations had profound implications for women's identity. As women were 'freed' from former constraints they experienced a new and possibly worse form of subjection, but this may paradoxically have led them to a greater consciousness of the need to resist and question their oppression. How did chattel slavery produce this changed consciousness? Firstly, it did not operate according to the cultural contexts of African societies; indeed it actively disrupted and negated those contexts. Secondly, it defined slaves as generalised commodities denying their human reality and bonds. Whites sought to create identities for slaves that would effectively deculturalise them and render them an atomised, effective and controllable work force as manageable as the other (animal) 'stock' on their plantations. Disempowerment through cultural 'stripping' is stressed in Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as 'social death' where slaves became 'dishonoured persons', outside the society in which they lived. This was achieved through 'natal alienation', the denial of the slave's history and right to a past or future. It was reinforced through renaming (often with ridiculous, inappropriate names such as Phibba, Clarissa, Lavinia) and non-acknowledgement of kinship bonds (Patterson, 1986, pp.56-58).

Names are the very essence of an individual's identity. Naming ceremonies are particularly important in many pre-modern cultures and are associated with ritual and symbolism. In rural African societies names had deep social significance and were endowed with magical significance. 'Secret' names are common in many societies and frequently received on initiation into adulthood and cults. Such names can be used harmfully in sorcery (Patterson, 1986, p.55). It is possible that slaves concealed their own names to deflect the wickedness of whites and protect themselves against strange fellow slaves. We can never know if African-born slave mothers, for instance, gave their children 'secret' African names, although there is evidence that African-derived rites associated with new born infants persisted into late slavery and even into the twentieth century in rural areas in the Caribbean (Smith, 1956, pp.133-4). The existence of these 'secret identities' is an exciting speculation but impossible to verify. However, concrete evidence does confirm how names, like branding, were central to white constructs of black identity.

As anonymous 'goods' women initially had no names or were given generic 'African' names. In Jamaica these were frequently based on Asante (Akan) day names and used by whites to confirm the 'otherness' of women. The most common were Quasheba, Cuba and Yabba, from the Asante, Akosuwa, Akuwa and Yaa or Yawa (Sunday, Wednesday, Thursday). Such names were still given to new-borns by 'an old woman' in August Town in British Guiana in the 1950s, a testimony to the enduring social significance of naming in African-Caribbean communities and of women to cultural continuity (Smith, p.131). Sale advertisements, however, simply described both male and female as 'young, healthy negroes of the Ibo country' (or Popo, Ashanti etc.) whilst advertisements for slave runaways often identified African slaves by owners' brands or markings associated with their ethnic origins such as tattoos, ritual scars and filed teeth. The complexity of this naming and identification is clearly shown in one such advertisement for a Kingston-born woman named Flora who had run away with her daughter, Phiba (sic) 'who calls herself often Cuba and Abba'. Here we have evidence of names in existence other than those given by masters. Cuba was also 'marked on both shoulders A.W.' but the brand was 'raised in lumps from endeavouring to take them out' a testimony to how one woman rejected her slave identity.[7] On the plantation some 'generic' names persisted, but with creolisation English names, such as Mary or Lucy, became more common with surnames appearing towards emancipation identifying women with their owners. It was mainly these names that carried through into freedom and which inspired, for instance, Malcolm X's own renaming, the X symbolising the lost identity of blacks in the diaspora.

Such a change of name represents the most fundamental change of identity in any cultural context. But the ways in which slave identity was defined also stimulated a consciousness of oppression and the need to engage in struggle against the fragmentation of identity represented by naming and definitions of slave status. New forms of resistance associated with migration and dislocation emerged. 'Modern life begins with slavery' writes Toni Morrison, 'black women [under slavery] had to deal with postmodern problems ... certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability' (Morrison, 1988, p.221). As C. L. R. James argued in his vanguard study of black resistance, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), the large-scale sugar plantation was not a semi-feudal relic but a 'modern system' producing new and dynamic social relations and developments in collective consciousness. Of course, the debate over the nature of slavery as feudal, transitional or proto-capitalist is still very

[7]Slave advertisement placed by Alexander Walker, Luana, St. Elizabeth, Aug.30th, 1779, *The Jamaica Mercury,* June 26, 1779.

much alive, but the concept of the slave as a 'migrant' is very useful in explaining changing identities.

David Brion Davis also sees slaves as the first truly 'modern people', arguing that they have been defined as outside the familial and social structures of the slave-owning society from ancient times. He defines a slave as:

> ' ...a replaceable and interchangeable outsider faced with the unpredictable need of adjusting to a wholly alien culture ...the prototype for the migratory labour and confused identity which accompanied every phase of human progress.'[8]

This definition of outsider status was confirmed by white affirmation of the ingrained inferiority of the slave through racist stereotyping. The psychoanalytical concept of the 'other' that has informed recent critiques of post-colonial literature exploring 'transformations' through migration is helpful here (Gurnah, 1994). By creating 'imagined identities' for slave women, whites defined their 'otherness', that is the possession of qualities that were simultaneously denigrated and desired. Identity of both white and black was arguably derived from the displacement of negative or desired but socially outlawed traits (such as sexuality) on to the 'other'. I am wary of using this concept too loosely here as psychoanalysis is rooted in twentieth century consciousness that centralises the individual. It is thus limited in exploring a 'collective consciousness' within wider structures which arguably determined much (though not all) slave resistance. However, 'othering' in the context of slavery is related to the Hegelian observation that a master was defined only through the slave and without the slave the master had no identity and hence no power to exert. It may thus have some validity in understanding cultural struggles and the need for whites to deny and actively repress slave culture, demonising slave women as 'she-devils' and 'harlots' whilst being seduced by their exoticism. Equally, the concept of 'the other' has relevance to black women's transformations through migration. Unlike other migrations (such as Indian indentured labour in the Nineteenth-century Caribbean and post-war North African migration to France) women constituted a significant proportion of the active labour force. Whereas women in other migrant societies have, if possible, retreated into their own families and communities as a means of defence against a hostile society, this was not possible for female slaves and they were brutally forced to confront their 'otherness'.

Women's lives, writes Maya Angelou, were dissolved through slavery into a 'fabulous fiction of multiple personalities' (Angelou, 1989, p.209). Women were 'concrete in their labour and surreal in their humanness'.

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[8]David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984) p.46.

How far does this 'long memory' of an African-American woman, attempting to disentangle present day identities, match up to the historical evidence on images of black women? Images are metaphors created by the observer and as mental conceptions can be 'imagined' and used symbolically. Mainly negative images merged into dominant stereotypes, or composite pictures of individuals, which, whilst reflecting an element of reality, also distorted it. Stereotypes exhibit a notable durability even in the face of historical change. Thus, although images of black women did change (in visual representation, for instance), a core of negative stereotyping has remained around black female sexuality with important consequences for women's identity. Such images predated women's capture in Africa and have helped obscure the concrete exploitation of black women, sexual and economic, and precluded a more valid appraisal of their changing identities. How, then, did myths and misconceptions of black women arise?

When the Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battatu, visited Mali in 1352, he was shocked by the sexual freedom and nakedness of women but did not express any objection to the sight of both males and females working in copper mines (Davis, 1984, p.46). Travellers' tales from Africa embellished upon this dual persona, commenting on women's strength and muscularity and the way they competed with men in 'enduring toil, hardship and privations'. Women's drudge status was confirmed by 'polygamy' which whites believed simultaneously promoted promiscuity and reduced women to 'the domestic slaves of men' (Bush, 1990, pp.25-6). Women were depicted as either submissive workhorses, emasculating matriarchs or 'hot consitution'd' scarlet women, lewd and promiscuous in their relations with black and white men. Black women's physical appearance was adversely contrasted with the bourgeois ideal of female beauty, emphasising their animality and inferiority. Interestingly, there is no 'good' versus 'bad' Caribbean stereotype equivalent to the 'scheming Jezebel'/ 'loyal Mammy' comparison of the American South where an idealised seignorial paternalism was the basis of slave society. Contrasting images of women are depicted in this anonymous poem from Jamaica, 'The Sable Venus: An Ode' (1765):

'O Sable Queen! Thy mild Domain
I seek and court thy gentle reign
So soothing, soft and sweet.
Where meeting love, sincere delight
Fond pleasures, ready joys invite,
And unbrought raptures meet.

Do thou in gentle Phibia smile,
In artful Benneba beguile,
In wanton Mimba pout

In sprightly Cuba's eyes look gay
Or grave in sober Quasheba
I still shall find thee out.'[9]

Tempting, scheming, wanton; all is here except the concrete reality of labour. Interestingly, the writer uses several 'African' names, but whether they were used to reinforce the exoticism and otherness of black women or were in common usage is debatable.

In late slavery, British abolitionists created other 'personas', from 'sable beauties' and 'dusky Venus's' to the innocents betrayed in need of pity and protection. At least the exploitation of slave women was now acknowledged. Abolitionist poetry created biographies of women's lives graphically charting the horrors they suffered from capture to sale in Jamaica. Again there seems to be some licence with names in two very similar abolitionist poems published in the 1790s, 'Cruelty Extraordinary Committed On a Female Slave of the Name of Yamba in the Island of Jamaica' (c.1790) and 'The Sorrows of Yamba; or, a Negro Woman's Lament'. Christian abolitionists advocated redemption through Christian conversion and 'moralisation'. The Ladies Society For the Relief of Negro Slaves was particularly concerned that slave women lacked male protection and were prevented from leading the lives of 'normal good wives'. In female abolitionist propaganda, they were identified as the 'weakest ... of the human race' and worthy of white women's special 'maternalistic' attention (Midgely, 1992, p.28). Slave women were now expected to assume the 'respectability' of the bourgeois ideal of womanhood and deny their 'bad' African side.

Unusually, there does exist from this period the only substantial autobiography of a Caribbean slave woman. *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) reveals Mary's complex and ambiguous relationship with her master and mistress and gives some useful insights into slave conditions and treatment of slave women. But the author is in many ways atypical. For much of her life she had been attached to households, close to her white owners. She was one of the rare black women to make it to the relative freedom of England and had saved enough money to buy her freedom. In the Caribbean she had developed strong survival strategies that embraced both compromise and resistance. However, her sense of identity must have been affected by her relative isolation from her family and the cultural nourishment of the slave village on a large plantation as well as her marriage to a free, Christian skilled artisan. Already a convert to 're-

[9]Cited in Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (London, 1801) 5 vols., 2, p.33. For American female stereotypes, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985), ch.4.

spectability', she had repudiated her former 'bad ways' including 'loose' sexual relationships before leaving the Caribbean. On moving to London with her owners she left them to work for a prominent abolitionist family as a domestic servant. Her memoirs were dictated to the women of the family and were subsequently circulated in abolitionist circles to show how slave women needed help to achieve the respectability of 'normal' women. In narrating her life to white abolitionist women on whom she was dependent for her survival in an alien society her memoirs arguably became framed by white perceptions of black women and, as Moira Ferguson points out, it is only by reading between the lines that some sense of the real Mary Prince emerges (Ferguson, 1987).

At the same time cruder stereotypes of slave women were in more widespread circulation in England as the debate over slavery intensified. These were evident in the caricatures of the cartoonist, James Gillray, and the popularity of the 'Hottentot Venus' which, like many written accounts, stressed the physical unattractiveness and animality of black women. Plantocratic accounts berated the licentiousness of slave women, their insubordination, sharp tongues and unruliness that justified the use of the whip. They were neglectful mothers, careless midwives, idle and malingering domestics and scheming Jezebel's out to get what they could from white men (Bush, 1990). More generous descriptions still tended to project white concepts of beauty and female behaviour onto black identity as in John Stedman's account of his beloved mulatto mistress, Joanna, whose face was 'full of native modesty' with 'a perfectly formed, rather small nose' and only slightly prominent lips. A beautiful mulatto slave on Matthew Lewis' Jamaican estate, described by her paternalistic owner as having an 'air and countenance' comparable to the Virgin Mary as depicted in Renaissance art, was the 'most picturesque object' he had seen for twenty years.[10] Mulatto women were thus generally viewed in a more favourable light than African women although in many ways it can be argued that their identities were more problematic.

Until recently, little or no attention was given in mainstream histories to these thorny questions relating to images and identities of slave women. Yet it may be argued that images of women signify the extent of respect accorded to them in any society. There were glaring 'silences' in black women's history up to the late 1970's that were only addressed in rare, pioneering works by black women themselves. However, the sources to fill these silences remain fragmented and problematic, biased towards a Eurocentric perspective. Source material from the early period of slavery

[10]John Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam,* 1772-1777 (London, 1798), 2 vols., 1, pp.52-3; Lewis, pp.69-7.

is more scarce, but the abundant pro-planter and abolitionist accounts from the later period are flawed by bias and observations based on hearsay as well as direct experience. Testimonies are frequently contradictory, rendering evaluations of the more intimate areas of slave women's lives particularly difficult to piece together.

The lack of sources from the ordinary field slave's perspective makes it difficult to avoid accusations of Eurocentricity in attempts to look at the slave woman from the 'inside looking out' while impersonal accounts simply enhance women's anonymity. What African-American historians term an 'Afrocentric feminist epistemology' cannot be developed without recourse to oral history. This includes the 'imaginative appropriation of history' by black women (Gilroy, 1993, p.222). All are problematic for historians. Oral history has been worked into fine fiction and poetry; for instance the Guyanese writer Grace Nicholas has vividly evoked the experience of slave women as part of the heritage of modern Caribbean women in her poem *I is a Long Memoried Woman* (1983). But, conventionally, fiction cannot be cited as 'historical evidence' although arguments can be made that all history is 'imagined' and that which comes through the 'long memory' created by a particularly traumatic event such as slavery is of equal if greater validity for people of African descent than the arbitrary and selective use of the 'historical fact' by white historians. As French historians of the Annaliste school have postulated, traumatic events such as slavery have a powerful influence on the 'longue durée' of 'mentalités' (Dolan, 1991). This is a valuable concept in exploring the relationship between 'long memory' and a black identity which was profoundly influenced by the emotional shock of slavery as an individual, group and cultural trauma (Muccelli, 1986, p.73). As white historians, slavery has contributed significantly to our 'historical consciousness' but from a profoundly different perspective, and thus we can only glean a limited insight into how women's identities developed through slavery and after. Here historical research can arguably be enriched by anthropological perspectives, given the centrality of culture to identity.

Recent anthropological research into Caribbean societies has provided some fresh insight into the validity of oral history and 'first-time' histories of Caribbean societies in understanding their past. Also of value are the challenging new developments in feminist anthropology which, through innovative research into 'women's culture', since the 1970s has overturned the assumption of male anthropologists that 'man equals culture'. Anthropological sources from West African societies and the contemporary Caribbean, particularly where they relate to cultural forms such as religion which manifest elements of clear cultural continuity, are also helpful but can lead to ahistoricity in analysis. Is it valid to read from the present into the past, given the dynamic nature of culture and cultural influences?

From a white perspective, a deeper understanding of the cultural struggles of black women may only be possible through a judicious exercise of empathy. It is important to work on any evidence which does exist, but also to try to understand the 'underlying consciousness' of oppressed groups. This is where understanding culture struggles and negotiations becomes relevant.

Searching for the Invisible Woman: Cultural Struggles in Late Slavery

Cultural struggles involved powerful resistance to white-constructed identities of slave women. They facilitated the negotiation of new identities rooted in women's 'African' memory which enabled them to reclaim their own destinies. During the initial 'seasoning' period women slaves would have begun to develop a fuller consciousness of their slave status as they were integrated into plantation work regimes. Problems of adjustment to both physical environment and strangers were arguably paramount in terms of individual identity. As Edward Long noted:

> '...[Slaves] were soon dispersed among a variety of different estates many miles asunder ...often [finding] themselves mixed with many strangers, differing from them in language and against others they hold a rooted antipathy. But they are chiefly awed into subjection, by the superior multitude of creole blacks ...'[11]

There may have been an initial hostility to strangers as vulnerability and powerlessness produced a defensiveness and sense of group solidarity amongst those who had already developed a 'creole' identity. However, the passivity suggested by Long (in a sense a wish-fulfilment as the new African slaves were generally feared as rebel-rousers) is not borne out in other contemporary accounts. 'The unhappy Africans' wrote Snelgrave 'are not bereft of the finer feelings, but have a strong attachment to their native country together with a just sense of their liberty'. Newly imported Africans were blamed by whites as primarily responsible for 'seditions and mutinies' which accounts for the serious African-led rebellions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the formation of Maroon communities in which women took active roles, including leadership roles (Bush, 1990, pp.55-56).

Both men and women found 'fictive kin' among established slaves to replace their lost families. In West African societies, the extended kinship group was the kernel of social organisation, interaction and cultural

[11]Long, 3, p.131.

expression. The planter, Bryan Edwards, observed that Jamaican slaves of both sexes 'adopted' young Africans, perhaps to replace children lost by death. He maintained that the newly arrived slaves considered themselves adopted children also and called the slaves who cared for them parents and 'venerated them as such'. In conversation with newcomers 'seasoned' slaves could 'revive and retrace the remembrance of ideas and past pleasures and scenes of their youth', reinforcing bonds with Africa and assuring cultural continuity (Bush, 1990, p.105). The building of slave villages 'beyond the ken' of masters, the 'yard', deriving from the communal African compound, and the family provision-grounds were also vital to the rebuilding of a viable cultural matrix of which whites had little understanding. The yard was particularly important in that it served as a common meeting ground as well as developing a cohesive identity.

In white imagery new African slaves, male and female, were depicted as naked with only scant coverage. Sometimes idealised images of the nuclear (and patriarchal) slave family were presented as in the illustration of 'A Family of Negroes Slaves from Loanga' in Stedman's account of eighteenth-century Surinam (Stedman, 1798 , vol.1, p.89). There may be a grain of truth in this representation as white allegations of the pathological and disorganised matriarchal slave family have been strongly disputed (Bush, 1990). However, the exigencies of slavery must have put an exceptional strain on women and would have necessitated renegotiation of their relations with slave men, particularly as creolisation occurred and exploitation intensified with the development of large-scale plantation production. Arguably this involved a weakening of African patriarchy which, as aforementioned, became overshadowed in an institutional context by white patriarchy.

Throughout slavery, women's participation in the labour force and the greater need to develop individual survival strategies (resistant in running away and 'accommodating' in entering into concubinage with white men) would have changed perceptions of their own gender identities. This may explain the contrasts between descriptions of creolised female slaves and Maroon women whose identity may have remained more akin to that of women in African societies. From white descriptions, slave women come over as strong, defiant individuals who are neither dependent nor repressed by slave men whereas Maroon women tend to be portrayed as 'drudges', the passive victims of polygyny, sustaining a more conventional role within the sexual division of labour (Bush, 1990, p.21).

After abolition of the slave trade pictorial depiction of slave women began to change. In addition to the profoundly African images associated with abolitionist propaganda, in contemporary art women are now shown working in the field and mill wearing European dress. But often they are also wearing the head-tie, perhaps more typically African than

the nakedness focused on by whites. The head-tie can be interpreted as one of the clearest assertions of an 'African' identity. As the pioneering anthropologists of 'Black Atlantic' culture, Melville and Francis Herskovits concluded:

> 'The custom of wearing ... headkerchiefs originated in Africa and appeared most strongly in those areas of the New World in which African values retained their greatest strength, in some areas, in some cases, in which revolutionary resistance to slavery had been most pronounced and successful.'[12]

Cultural struggles intensified with economic development and white identities of slave women became more racist and derogatory (but also more fragmented and conflictual). It was arguably in the 'high' and most oppressive period of slavery (c.1780-1838) that the most significant and sophisticated cultural negotiations occurred linked to important changes in individual and group consciousness. These coincided with more intense exploitation of female labour combined with fuller creolisation. Concepts of freedom stimulated by abolitionism, the French Revolution, the Haitian liberation struggle and a more literal reading of the essence of Christianity were also influential. Slaves seemed even more ungovernable and women, as the 'backbone' of the labour force and internal marketing system through their informal economic activity, became the epitome of this 'ungovernability', as contemporary records show (Bush, 1982). Hegel is again relevant in understanding this development of slave consciousness. The 'moment of revolution', he wrote, comes when the slave recognises that her or his primary identity belongs with other slaves and is not necessarily mediated through the master. The slave thus no longer depends on the master for 'recognition' or identity (Hegel, 1977, pp.111-19). Domination, cultural and psychological, depended on a degree of acquiescence from the slave. This had never been fully given but became even more difficult to retain as slavery came to an end.

An area which engendered the most fierce cultural struggles between master and slave was religion and associated 'bad African practices' such as medicine and witchcraft. In animist sub-Saharan African societies religion coheres an individual's understanding of her or his world determining both individual identity and sense of place and collective consciousness. Religion, mysticism, magic, political and family organisation were unified into a powerful cultural framework inseparable from everyday material existence. Music, dance, art and oral tradition gave tangible expression to this culture. Even though slaves came from different areas, and some may even have been converted to Islam, these central elements would have provided the core framework of their lives. The power of this cultural base

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[12]M.J. and F. Herskovits, *Surinam Folk Lore* (New York, 1936), pp.4-5.

is evident in the importance of religion, music and oral expression, from calypso to rap, in the modern black diaspora. During slavery women creatively built on this base and made an important contribution to establishing an 'oppositional' Afro-slave culture.

White fear of slave culture is evident in the laws that were passed to suppress and/or control drumming, dancing, obeah and 'noisy' slave funerals. A clear link was made between Afrocentric culture and resistance to the system. The laws passed by the Jamaican House of Assembly, in 1826 stipulated that no owners or overseers should permit an assembly of 'strange slaves', 'nightly meetings' or allow 'any beating of drums, blowing of horns or shells' or other music on property under his charge. Any slaves practising obeah 'with intent to excite rebellion or endanger the life or health of any other slave' were to be severely punished.[13] Slave funerals and obeah were particularly feared. Funerals were riotous, life affirming affairs but dangerous because so many slaves attended. There is evidence that women, who often played a prominent part in slave funerals, may have rejected Christian baptism in order to secure for themselves a traditional African funeral reputedly not allowed in Jamaica for those who were christened (Bush, 1990, p.157).

Obeah was linked to poisoning which was seen as a particular forte of black women. 'An Obeah man or woman (for it is practised by both sexes) is a very wicked and dangerous person on the plantation', observed John Stewart.[14] Obeah, was a term used by whites to describe the 'pagan' religious ceremonies and spiritual beliefs of slaves. (In the French and Spanish colonies, the term *vodún* or 'voodoo' was commonly used.) It was directly African in origin and involved priests who dealt in magic, poisons, herbs and folk medicine, a highly secretive activity. Whites frequently lumped it together with myalism which was more concerned with group worship. During the eighteenth century, these religious practices were frequently implicated in fomenting rebellions. In an 'aura of spirit possession' slaves could be ordered to rebel, as often by a woman as a man. In Surinam, for instance, slaves had amongst them:

> ' ...a kind of Sybils who deal in oracles, these sage matrons [are found] dancing and whirling round in the middle of an assembly with amazing rapidity until they ...drop down convulsed. Whatever the prophetess orders to be done ...is most sacredly performed ...which renders these meetings ex-

[13]'Abstract of the Slave Laws' cited in [Bernard Martin Senior], *Jamaica as it was, as it is, and as it may be. By a Retired Military Officer* (London, 1835), pp.149-52.

[14]John Stewart, *A View of Jamaica* (London, 1823), p.278.

> tremely dangerous, as she frequently enjoins them to murder their masters or retreat to the woods.'[15]

There are similar reports from the French Caribbean, where grand voodoo priestesses reputedly had an important ritual role and gave 'superhuman courage' to insurgents (Gautier, 1983, p.429). This arguably reflects the practice in contemporary West African societies, such as Dahomey, of women holding positions of authority which were endowed with high priestly office (Adams, 1822, p.12). Even on the eve of emancipation (by which time many slaves were nominally converted to Christianity and creolisation was well-established) slaves were still allegedly 'addicted to witchcraft' and obeah men and women 'had a great ascendancy over other negroes' (Atwood, 1971, p.269). Such white perceptions of African religious practices may have been influenced by the experience of European witchcraft explaining the fear of poisoning which sometimes bordered on the paranoid. It was generally believed that certain slaves, particularly old women, had an exclusive knowledge of herbs and plants which could be used for healing but also for more sinister purposes. Such older women were frequently blamed for inexplicable deaths, black or white (Bush, 1990, pp.74-7).

Maria Cutrufelli has argued that in Africa during the disruption of colonial rule, witchcraft was women's primary response to the cultural dislocations which affected their position in the family and wider society (Cutrufelli, 1983, pp.162-3). This has relevance to slavery in that the cultural dislocations were even more severe. Invasive and disorientating cultural change can also stimulate religious cults as individuals seek solidity and meaning to their lives. Women have frequently been leaders of, and active participants in such cults, which are characteristically outside, if not directly in opposition to, the accepted forms of religion. England during early industrialisation and colonised African societies provide examples here (ibid., p.165). Participation in 'subversive' religions thus has direct bearing on the redefinition of women's identities, the development of a group consciousness which challenged slavery and the transmission of a specific 'women's culture'.

Where ritual and religion was involved, evidence from the slave period suggests a clear continuity with Africa. Important distinctions, common to many West African societies, were made between young (and fecund) women and older (post-menopausal) women. It was primarily the older women who participated in communal decision-making and acted as 'cultural guardians' of specifically female rites of passage, traditions and folk-wisdom. Older men and women alike were looked up to for their wisdom and knowledge of folklore and medicine, and the 'care and management' of

[15]Stedman, 2, p.304.

'afflicted' negroes was often entrusted to 'an elderly negroe woman who professes a knowledge of this branch of physic' (Stewart, 1832, p.312). Transmission of female 'folk' knowledge was through the 'women's culture' which cemented links between the different generations.

It was in the area of childbirth and child-rearing that the transmission of this 'women's culture' may have been particularly important, affording women both psychic and practical support. Older women were the slave midwives and were able to pass on to younger women their skills and knowledge. This arguably included abortifacients and contraception, an area always confined to the 'shadow' world of women because of male hostility or strong social taboos on such practices. A crucial struggle around this 'women's culture' emerged in late slavery when slave owners became more preoccupied with pro-natalist policies. In trying to impose white childbirth and rearing practices which suited the economics and smooth management of plantations, they encountered fierce resistance from women and a puzzling failure of slave populations to show a natural increase (Bush, 1993, pp.83-100).

This resistance was generated by the more widespread use of European medical practices. Cultural struggles intensified with the pressures of abolitionists to improve the treatment of slaves that led to the establishment of plantation hospitals or 'hot-houses' and the employment of white doctors. However, slave medicine, in which female 'doctoresses' were expert, may arguably have been more successful than 'scientific' white medicine, if only on the psychic level. As Richard Sheridan has pointed out, slaves were alienated from white culture, mistrusted white doctors and feared dying alone. Black healers could communicate in mother tongues or creole dialect and, if their herbal remedies did not cure, they were still preferable to the purgings and bleedings, opium and mercury of the whites (Sheridan, 1985, pp.151-5). As anthropological studies have shown, the ways in which sickness and death are conceptualised is integral to the cultural framework which shapes individual consciousness. Similar conflicts to those which emerged in slave societies still exist in parts of Africa where western medicine has a problematic relationship to traditional healers and magic with important social consequences (Allen, 1992).

Folk medicine developed in the Caribbean with essentially the same features as in Africa. Women in pre-colonial African society had a vital role in healing, particularly in the practical application of herbal remedies (as opposed to the magical or hypnotic medicines with which men were more familiar) and they also became prominent in healing in the slave community. In Sheridan's estimation, women's contribution as healers and nurses outside the plantation hot-house may have exceeded all the health services provided by the white establishment (Sheridan, 1985, p.137). This importance of women is underscored by the persistence of women's heal-

ing culture into the post-slavery period. Mary Seacole, for instance, who gained a reputation as a nurse during the Crimean War which arguably outshone that of Florence Nightingale, reputedly learnt her skills from her mother, 'a competent practitioner of Jamaican [African] traditional medicine' who kept a boarding-house in Kingston in early nineteenth century to care for invalid officers and their wives (Fryer, 1985, p.246). Women in the Caribbean today retain special skills as healers as well as knowledge of abortifacients (Bush, 1993, p.93).

During the late period of slavery medical and other general 'improvements' in slave conditions were accompanied by attempts to moralise slaves, particularly the women, which led to a direct confrontation with the Afrocentred religious beliefs which cohered slave culture and resistance. Slave religion, even after the introduction of Christianity, retained a high African content and there is evidence of a notable aversion to Christian marriage and baptism among female slaves. Women were 'well acquainted with all the customs and mythology of their native country' (Riland, 1837, p.104) and may have rejected Christianity to a greater extent than men. They had little to gain from Christianity with its deep-seated misogynism and patriarchal doctrine emphasising female subordination. This contrasted starkly with the relative egalitarianism of West African religions and Cutrufelli has noted a similar rejection of Christianity by women under colonial rule (Cutrufelli, 1983, p.52). Women wanted to retain, for instance, the relative independence and equality in divorce that slave marriage customs allowed. As one prospective Jamaican bride who failed to turn up at her wedding noted, she had lived with her husband for many years in 'peace and comfort' and feared that Christian marriage would give her husband licence to 'beat and ill-treat her' (Senior, 1835, pp.42-3).

Christian baptism was also viewed by women with strong suspicion. One Jamaican woman on Matthew Lewis' estate, despite her father and husband both going through the baptism ceremony, refused as she was pregnant and did not know 'what change it might produce upon herself and the infant'. Creole women slaves were not necessarily more receptive of Christianity. A neighbour of Lewis' allegedly used all his influence to persuade his 'foster sister' to be christened, but in vain, 'for she had imbibed strong African prejudices from her mother'. In Lewis' opinion this was a common attitude amongst female slaves (Lewis, 1845, pp.53,121). Generally speaking planter efforts to moralise slaves and render them docile through religion proved ineffective. Christianity stressed submissiveness on earth in return for reward in the hereafter in contrast to the life-affirming African beliefs. As emancipation approached, slaves may have outwardly given more acceptance to Christianity, but the content of their religion and beliefs remained African, shaping an important counter-

identity which gave meaning and validity to their lives. Whilst a minority of slaves may have genuinely embraced conversion, the majority clung to their own beliefs which still underpinned a fierce resistance to the system necessitating the retention of strong repressive laws. On the eve of emancipation Jamaican law still stipulated:

> 'Penalty of fifty pounds for not endeavouring to suppress unlawful assemblies of slaves ... Civil and military officers to suppress such assemblies ... Slaves may have diversions on the properties they belong to, if no drums &c. are used; but they must be over by ten at night. Negro burials to be over at sunset ... Free people suffering assemblies in their houses to be imprisoned; if complained of ... Slaves pretending to supernatural power may be sentenced to death ... Slaves having any poisonous drugs ... in their possession, to be transported, or punished at the discretion of the [all white] court.'[16]

Such laws reflect the relative lack of success of the 'moralising' campaigns of the later period of slavery and the sheer fear of Afrocentric culture. But they also focalise the power of whites and the assumptions they made that slaves would only live lives which fitted their interests. What, one may ask, were slaves supposed to do after the early tropical sunsets when they finished work? This is useful point to expand on the more generalised developments in slave culture and their contribution to the 'moment of liberation'. The language and music of slaves which nourished and supported the collective morale demands particular consideration, and here women also feature prominently.

Cultural defiance on the part of women was often expressed through language and song. Language was a vital area of slave identity; as Franz Fanon stressed, 'to speak is to assume a culture' (Fanon, 1986, pp.13-14). Language was a first defence against loss of meaningful identity. Creole, the language of Caribbean blacks, with its rich nuances, double entendres and cutting satire was central in daily resistance to oppression. Verbal abuse was frequently used by female field hands and it was alleged that female slaves talked 'worse' than males and their language was described in derogatory terms (Bush, 1990, p.158). The slaves' everyday language preserved and dynamically adapted the rich linguistic structures of Africa, and the power of language in cultural definition and as a defence against a dominant white culture remains central to black identity in the Atlantic Diaspora.

This rich creole found expression through song and associated oral cultural forms. On slave plantations, women were often the leading singers.

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[16]Richard Madden, *A Twelve Month's Residence in the West Indies* (London, 1835), 2 vols, 1, pp.160-1.

William Beckford noted that in Jamaica, singing was 'confined' to the women, the men 'but seldomly ...excepting on extraordinary occasions' joining in the chorus. Thomas Atwood remarked that in the field women sang songs 'of their own composing' which were answered in the same manner by men. They sang 'wild choruses of joy' at crop-over, but song also expressed the sorrow of enslavement. 'There is something affecting in the songs of the women who feed [the mill]' wrote Beckford '[in] that all their songs are of a plaintive cast'. Through such singing, which was typically African in structure, based on a pattern of statement and response, work could be rendered less burdensome, slave morale could be raised and white masters mimicked, satirised or even subtly threatened.[17]

Song, music and dance accompanied all the important events in a slave's life. Entertainment in the slave village was also provided by the voices of female slaves, sometimes accompanying themselves with 'home-made' instruments. 'Plays' were highly popular, combining verbal dexterity, music and dance. Both sexes participated, forming a ring around a male and female dancer who performed to the music of the drum. Saturday night dances were also held which slaves from neighbouring plantations attended. Emma Carmichael noted that in Trinidad women often provided the 'supper, liquor and music' sometimes charging a small entrance fee, evidence of their entrepreneurial flair in the 'informal' economy. The music on these occasions consisted generally of 'the goombay, or drum, several rattles and the voices of female slaves'. John Stewart, writing in the 1820s about Jamaica, noted that on more serious occasions, 'a melancholy dirge' was sung by a woman accompanied by an all female chorus. For him women's voices were the best part of slave music.[18]

In sum, women were arguably more deeply resistant to white cultural influences than men for the reasons outlined in the discussion of the relationship between gender and culture in the earlier part of this paper. Proportionately more women than men were field hands at emancipation and, as Elsa Goveia noted in her pioneering study of slave laws, the African element in field slave culture was strong (Goveia, 1965, pp.244-5). In women's contribution to new cultural developments we have an important example of the reworking of identities through struggle and negotiation which presented a positive counterbalance to the predominantly negative 'white visions' of slave lives. Where song is concerned, women may even have transcended the prescribed limits of female par-

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[17]William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of The Island of Jamaica* (London, 1790), 2 vols., 2, pp.120,211; Atwood, p.258. For a general discussion of slave music, see Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford, 1971), p.225.

[18]Carmichael, 2, p.289; Stewart, pp.271-273. See also Long, 2, p.428; Atwood, p.267.

ticipation in West African societies. The prominence of women's voices in the musical traditions of the slaves may have been a unique response to slavery and the negotiation of new gender roles. Many folk choirs in the modern Caribbean are still comprised largely of women who often take the leading vocals, men giving mainly choral support (in contrast to commercialised music where men have predominated until very recently).

Similarly, women have kept a powerful profile in Afro-based religious and magical practices. In the 1920s, Martha Beckwith observed that Obeah women and men still had power ('French women' were the most feared, apparently, perhaps alluding to Haitian vodun). In revivalist cults 'mammies' claimed the gift of prophesy and healing and attained a prominent reputation. These practices were now viewed by whites as evidence of the 'emotional instability' of negroes or 'religious mania' leading to the insane asylum, an indication of the persistence of white racism and cultural oppression (Beckwith, 1969, pp.137-8,161-4). Women still outnumber men as religious devotees of syncretic religions throughout the Caribbean. To gain insight into this ongoing process of cultural identification and conflict it is useful to briefly explore the mechanisms of change during the transition to freedom and the post-slave colonial society.

Out of Bondage? Women, Culture and Colonialism

Afrocentred creole culture arguably developed through an interchange of cultural traits between black and white in an atmosphere of creativity but also tension (Brathwaite, 1973, p.41). During late slavery this generated powerful cultural struggles. Did this dynamism ironically become subdued in freedom when the absolute power of planters was replaced by a more diffuse but no less significant colonial power? The power whites in slave society could wield was enormous but it was arguably not as destructive of Afrocentric culture as the more subtle forms of cultural imperialism which emerged in the nineteenth century. Slaves, simply by virtue of the fact that they were not recognised as having a viable society and culture, were able to retain a degree of cultural autonomy where no direct conflict with planters' economic interests emerged. Pro-slavery whites were not interested in 'culturally civilising' Africans. This was not the case after abolition where there was a strong movement, promoted initially by abolitionists, to create a vigorous and free but also a 'respectable' (Europeanised) peasantry. Whereas the slave system was characterised for the most part by coercion, punishment and, in the formal economy, cultural annihilation through 'social death', whites now had to increasingly resort to more subtle mechanisms in their suppression of what they perceived as inferior cultural forms.

communities continued to develop during the nineteenth century, and in the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion stimulated by the ongoing poverty of black Jamaicans, Daddy Sharp had his counterpart in Paul Bogle, a black Baptist Deacon (Turner, 1982, pp.11-17,57-61).

During the Apprenticeship period, however, women continued to be troublesome to whites. A 'turbulent and rebellious' protest against work conditions in St. Kitts in 1834, for instance, mainly involved women and children (Frucht, 1975, p.208). Overall, however, black women seem to become less 'visible' after this period. What happened in freedom to all those defiant, insubordinate and actively resistant women? More pertinently, how were identities of women changed and renegotiated? My argument is that the more subtle mechanisms of colonial legitimization, particularly missionary activity and the 'education' of blacks in 'Victorian values' subdued (but did not destroy) the cultural dynamism of the slave period. As standards of 'civilisation' and 'progress' were frequently assessed in terms of the 'behaviour' of women and the nature of gender relations, in freedom women were once more central to cultural struggles but this time as the key to the moralising projects of whites. As Catherine Hall in a recent seminal article has shown, the 'free villages' in Jamaica were set up to realise these projects, and the withdrawal of women from labour outside the home was seen vital to their success. 'Threaded through missionary discourse on the free village', she writes, 'was the vision of a new gender order' centred on a good family life where men were urged to become 'men of property'. Under missionary influence, Christian marriage was increasingly celebrated and the urgent need was stressed for the training of 'pious and intelligent' female teachers to instruct the 'rising female race' and counteract the 'degrading influence of slavery'. When the abolitionist Joseph Sturge urged that the 'negro' should be taught the value of independence, concludes Hall, he meant the negro man, on whom the negro woman was to learn a new form of dependence (Hall, 1993, p.110).

In her study of missionary attempts to convert black women in nineteenth-century Nevis to a 'respectable' life-style, Karen Fog Olwig argues that, for some women, adoption of white norms led to a complete break with Afro-Caribbean culture. This resulted in greater social acceptance but also to 'self-hatred', intensifying role conflicts. It undermined women's autonomous economic activities, holding dances in their houses, Sunday marketing and lucrative pottery-making, which missionaries viewed with contempt. 'Respectable women' were thus forced to retreat into 'domestic invisibility' to ensure recognition (Olwig, 1993). But the economic reality of women's lives was such that it was impossible for most to live up to white bourgeois standards of femininity. Where women did adopt the outward trappings of 'respectability' they did not necessarily deny

This 'cultural imperialism' which may be defined as a 'dominant power imposing aspects of its culture on a 'weaker' society in economic, military and political terms' (Walker, 1991, p.80) had important consequences for how women mediated European, African and related 'gender cultures'. Under colonial rule 'respectability' was imposed through education, religion and, in the later nineteenth century, through the 'traditions of Empire'. For the missionaries, reformers and administrators who permeated colonial society, argues Catherine Hall, there was 'no black culture only white' and the attitudes and practical actions of whites were important in reworking both black and white identities with important consequences for contemporary British and Caribbean societies (Hall, 1993, p.127). West Indian free blacks were increasingly defined as 'superior English Negroes', the men of whom were needed to service the Empire as soldiers and missionaries. This white construct of the 'civilised' Caribbean black thus became central to the vindication of the anti-slavery movement but also acted as a model for what could be achieved in the more 'barbaric' Africa through a civilising white influence. How did these developments affect black women's identity after emancipation?

There has to date been little research into the specific responses of women to nineteenth-century colonialism in the Caribbean. Historians of this period tend to emphasise the improvements in the living conditions and situation of black women which, by the mid 1840s, had turned around the negative population increase that existed throughout slavery to normal levels. With abolition, it is argued, women abandoned field labour on the estates, 'devoting their time to housekeeping and raising their families' (Sheridan, 1993, pp.36-7). This cosy scene of Victorian domesticity provides sharply contrasting images to those evoked for the times of slavery, more aptly fitting the white abolitionist and missionary ideal of free black peasant society. Missionary activity intensified in the Caribbean during the transition from slavery and in the 'reconstruction' period when it was vital for abolitionists to justify their arguments for 'free' labour. This did not always have the desired effect as is evident in the impact of the Baptists in late Jamaican resistance to slavery. Preachers known as 'Black Baptists' had arrived in Jamaica in 1783 with American loyalists from Charleston, South Carolina and later became active in movements to overthrow slavery together with 'native preachers' converted by white missionaries like William Knibb. Religious meetings became a new form of political organisation as they were essentially the only organised activity allowed slaves. But male preachers now dominated, in contrast to the earlier rebellions where female 'obeah women' had considerable influence. The serious 1831 'Baptist War' on the eve of emancipation, was led by Sam Sharp – 'Daddy Sharp' – the symbolic father leading a 'Black Family War'. This pattern of leadership of black

their African cultural roots. Recognition also came from their 'reputation' within the Afro-oriented black community (Bush, 1990, p.3). Moreover, Olwig's work does not deal in sufficient depth with the mechanisms through which respectability was imposed. Karen Anderson's study of the Jesuits' project to subdue Huron women in seventeenth century New France may provide some leads here. Her research suggests that the Jesuits also saw women as the key to moralisation of a 'barbaric' society, but the reputed 'unruliness' and sexual promiscuity of Huron women posed serious barriers and they were obliged to work through male converts who would then 'police' their own women. The Jesuits thus skilfully tapped a patriarchal misogyny deep-rooted in the creation myths of many cultures and in so doing curbed female power and undermined the more egalitarian relationships which had existed between men and women before colonial intervention (Anderson, 1992, p.179).

Similar processes of change can be charted in other societies oppressed by European colonisation and cultural and racial arrogance. Writing of colonial Africa, Megan Vaughn shows how women were seen by colonial officials as the 'repository of all that was dark and evil in African culture', the central figures in fertility cults and 'traditional' religions. As late as 1931, whites wrote of the 'heathen grandmothers who held mothers and daughters in their power', leaving Christian husbands to stand by 'helpless and hopeless'. Conflict also resulted over the introduction of Western reproductive medicine and women showed 'stubborn resistance' to attempts to change childbirth. The solution was the 'control' of women through Christianised men exerting their authority at home to curb their heathen practices. Missionaries and administrators wanted women to represent order and when they stepped out of their 'traditional roles', for instance as migrant workers, they induced 'heightened concern' over social disintegration. (Parallels with slave women are clear here). As in most colonial societies, whites ignored women's organisations and active contribution to their communities dealing only with the men (Vaughn, 1991, pp.22-3,69,70).

For aboriginal women the process was arguably more oppressive given the brutal nature of 'pacification' and land alienation. There are many important similarities between aboriginal and slave women, in terms of sexual exploitation by whites, labour in work not deemed suitable for white women and negative stereotyping as sex objects and domestic drudges. Women held considerable power in aboriginal society, but the dislocation through displacement and relocation that brought them into closer contact with whites undermined their relations with Aboriginal men. Missionaries wanted them to become 'God-fearing women who knew no shame' and classified men as 'heads' of household. As in the Caribbean and colonial Africa, it was the men who found a 'more accommodat-

ing' niche in the emerging male-dominated colonial society; it was their power base that became the 'negotiating forum' with whites, not women's. Thus, gender relations changed dramatically, particularly on mission stations and women who had previously not feared men now experienced jealousy and violence in marriage, suggesting a deepening misogyny. But it was arguably also the women who, in maintaining their rituals and religion and remaining 'prolific dreamers', defended their communities against cultural annihilation and held on to the historical memories of the community (Bell, 1983, pp.96-8).

Although insufficient evidence currently exists, it may be argued that similar processes undermining 'women's culture' were at work in the Caribbean with analogous implications for identity, gender relations and ongoing cultural resistance. An evaluation of the outcome of moralisation projects may offer some insight into these processes. As idealistic whites became disillusioned by the failure of their utopian projects to establish a free, self-reliant and enterprising black peasantry, racist attitudes began to harden and black men and women came under even greater pressure to conform to white norms to gain 'recognition' from whites. This led, arguably, to a more sharply defined 'double consciousness' with all its implications for black identity. Nevertheless, by the 1860s it was reported that myalism and obeah and other 'barbarous' practices carried through from slavery had not been eradicated and fear was expressed that without further 'moralisation' through white influence Jamaican blacks would 'fall into as low a position as some of the worst tribes in Africa' (Hall, 1993, pp.126-7). This can also be interpreted as evidence of ongoing cultural resistance which was centred particularly around religion and attachment to 'family land', both which were fundamental to the development of a viable Afrocentric community during slavery. However, research relating to the part women played in this resistance and the ways in which gender and black identity was reworked in a specifically female context is as yet in early stages and here Besson's recent research on power and gender in Caribbean peasant communities as seen through oral traditions, for instance, may be revealing (Besson, 1993).

Can we, therefore, suggest ways in which women's identities may have changed in freedom? Certainly 'identities' constructed by whites shifted with the moralisation project and the increasing need to contrast the 'civilised', respectable Caribbean woman with the 'primitive', naked, and sexual African woman as imperialist energies were targeted on Africa, nourished by a new and virulent scientific racism. Moreover, women lost their source of cultural renewal from Africa as creolisation was completed. There was some 'free' immigration from Africa particularly to larger islands like Jamaica and Trinidad, but numbers were small and predominantly male (Clarence Smith, 1992, p.209). New identity con-

flicts emerged in the renegotiation of gender relationships. As a patriarchal colonialism emphasised male 'progress' and engagement in the public sphere, women became further marginalised from history. Colonial structures assumed gender-power relationships along the public/private divide similar to that which existed in Europe and it was men, therefore, who predominantly had dealings with whites not women.

Paradoxically, these developments ensured, however, that it was primarily women who kept alive a vernacular Afrocentric culture which had survived through slavery into freedom (Bush, 1996). This was confirmed by pioneering studies of the African diaspora made by the anthropologists Frances and Melville Herskovits in the 1930s and 1940s at a time when colonialism and colonial attitudes remained powerful. Such attitudes are evident in, for instance, Martha Beckwith's patronising study of Jamaican folk culture in the 1920s which ironically also provides insight into the degree to which an Afrocentric culture was retained as a foundation of black identity and defence against the psychic oppression and inferiorisation of white racism. Beckwith applauded the fact that 'much had been done' through the 'imposition' of British law and social and religious patterns to produce a 'sense of order'. In Jamaican households the father was 'emphatically the head authority'. Yet she also noted that women 'perhaps more than men' hesitated to be 'bound irrevocably' by legal marriage and were prominent in the 'heathen practices' which could only be eradicated if folk culture could be tamed into a 'more robust and healthy way of thinking and living' (Beckwith, 1969, p.102).

Cultural imperialism was perhaps most 'successful' in the way that upwardly mobile black men absorbed western values of female 'respectability' and the importance of the patriarchal, nuclear family to social order and black progress. As Gilroy has noted, even important nineteenth-century black intellectual leaders who stressed pride in black culture and history, such as Edward Blyden, held conventional 'Victorian values' of 'a women's place'. The honour of the race was increasingly invested in the 'good behaviour' of women and securing their centrality to the black family offered the main hope for black renewal. The black search for a new post-slavery identity was intimately linked to redefinitions of gender and sexuality characterised by the emergence of an idealised black patriarchy (Gilroy, pp.85-6). This involved retreat from the public sphere reducing women's potential for autonomous action. The reassertion of 'traditional' gender relations in black consciousness movements has persisted in, for instance, the influential writings of Malcolm X and Rastafarian beliefs, creating enduring problems for contemporary black feminists in their relations with black men. Hence, as new black political movements emerged, women once again became central to cultural struggles, this time not to reinforce white power and superiority but to assert black pride and auton-

omy and to reconstruct a black masculinity which had been distorted and undermined by slavery. In the extreme, these developments have led to evidence of a powerful black misogyny reflected in, for instance, calypso, reggae and rap which, combined with persistent negative white images of black womanhood, has created particular problems for contemporary black women's identity (Senior, 1992).

Summary

An old Ibo legend tells of how God decided not to allow women to fight wars since they were so fierce they might have wiped out the world. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in this legend in the defiant and resistant actions of slave women. Both academic research and the 'imaginative recovery' of black history in the writings of women like Toni Morrison increasingly centralise the contribution women made to the survival of slavery and Afrocentric culture. Women, in combating the demeaning and confusing identities created for them by whites during slavery, made a seminal contribution to the development of a vibrant and challenging 'counterculture' reinforced by powerful elements of 'women's culture' relating to childbirth, family, religion and medicine. However, emancipation opened up a new period of cultural imperialism with the pressure for 'respectability'. New tensions developed between the dominant white culture, imposed from above through increasingly sophisticated mediums, and the vernacular black culture with clear implications for contemporary cultural struggles and black identity.

Although the dynamic and unique cultural struggles forged through the horrors of slavery were tempered and transformed by the cultural imperialism of the colonial period, women continued to be the 'principle exponents' and bearers of Afrocentric culture and the anchors of Afrocentric family and local networks. This was crucial to black survival when poverty and migratory patterns of employment ensured that the 'respectable' stable family promoted by concerned whites became an impossible ideal to live up to except for a better off minority. Indeed, women's marginality to the white society of the formal economy and political system may have had positive outcomes in shielding them from the stresses of constantly interconnecting with two cultures and enabling them to more positively and wholeheartedly embrace an Afrocentred perspective on their world. As Cornelia Fichtl found in her work with the Jamaican theatre collective, Sistren, rituals preserved and played out by women were and are a 'metaphor' of togetherness in an Afrocentred culture (Fichtl, 1993). They have helped to solidify black women's reality in

a world where the negative white images of black womanhood stretching back to slavery and before still persist.

The origins of those images and the cultural struggles which challenged them has been the focus of this paper. I have tried to chart the fluidity and dynamism of black cultural resistance and its relevance to interpreting women's experiences in slavery through to freedom. I have argued that both material conditions and white constructs of black women's identity intermeshed with elements of African culture to reshape black women's cultural landscape and gender identity. A complex and unique cultural context developed under slavery where the forces of cultural annihilation and atomisation into alienated individuals ironically produced a powerful resistance which forged a new community and creole culture. Centre staging culture has thrown into relief subtle gender differences and a diversity of individual experiences absent from more orthodox economic and demographic studies of slavery.

Culture and identity have been shown as significant in two main ways; firstly, in interpreting the resistance which intersected the formal and informal spheres of women's lives and, secondly, in understanding the ways in which women survived slavery. What has emerged here is the degree to which women were pivotal in both the psychic and material survival of the slave community in their active contribution to the strongest areas of African-derived culture that have carried through to the present, religion, music and language. Despite severe constraints women continuously engaged in cultural struggles which challenged both the practice and ideology of slavery. But in freedom, women's identity was reinterpreted by both white and black men. With the development of black political struggles for civil rights and autonomy within a white-defined world, women gained a new significance as symbols of black identity and producers of universal values through the family. For the educated activists they became icons of 'cultural purity' while black men in general sought to reassert a male power suppressed by white men under slavery. Cultural struggles intertwined with gender conflicts thus continued to be significant to the development of post-slave societies (Macaulay, ed. 1996).

Throughout this paper, continuities in black women's experiences linking past and present have been stressed. However, my discussion of historiographical and theoretical problems relating to those experiences and to the nature of identity, consciousness and cultural power relations points to areas which merit further research. Until recently, for instance, the concept of 'double-consciousness' or indeed 'race-consciousness' in general has been articulated almost exclusively from a male perspective. There is also considerable scope for comparative studies on slave women in the non-Anglophone Caribbean. Another area warranting deeper investigation is the 'free' colonial period (Shepherd et. al., 1995). This includes

comparative studies of other groups of women oppressed by white culture and colonialism. Such women share much in common with black diaspora women and are now also reasserting their identity, drawing on their 'long memories' and cultural inheritance in ongoing struggles against white oppression. Historical insight into identity spotlights the need to combine 'conventional' historical research with the unique insights which black women's 'dreamings' of their own histories can give us. Moreover, identity and the development of self-consciousness must be viewed from the inside as well as 'objectively' in relation to ideological and material developments. This cannot be done by white historians. History itself is inseparable from culture and identity, a point that black women themselves are now forcibly making. Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dust* (USA, 1991), which weaves together history and memory, collective and individual, into a compelling narrative of the lives of women in a sea island Gullah community of the coast of Georgia at the turn of the century, epitomises this new trend. Through imaginative mediums such as film, literature, poetry and oral history black women are now articulating their own histories as part of a concrete struggle to refind the 'princess in darkness' and a more equal place in contemporary diaspora societies.

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